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ABSTRACT

In July and August 1975, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 347 adults living in Indiana County, Pennsylvania to gather information on the health services needed, physician extenders (i.e., nurse practitioners and physician's assistants), adequate health care for everyone, and regular health habits of the population. The sample included 114 adults from the northern part of the county, 114 from the central area, and 119 from the southern region. After the results were compiled, statistical weightings were given to the different regions, which had been sampled at different rates, to make the results representative of the county as a whole. Findings included: 87% of the people felt that the availability of doctors was in need of improvement for Indiana County; availability of doctors was especially of concern in the more rural northern and southern regions; 86% indicated that they had a family doctor; of the 14% who did not have a family doctor, most said no doctor was available in the area or that one was not needed; 74% stated that they would usually or always be willing to accept help from a physician extender working under the direct supervision of a doctor; 67% reported that they regularly did things to stay healthy; 25% rated their health as very good, 45% as good, 22% as average, and 8% as not so good or poor; and regular exercising was the most often mentioned health activity. (NQ)

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HEALTH NEEDS SURVEY
INDIANA COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

Summer 1975

by

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Paper No. 12
September, 1976

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INTRODUCTION

The provision of adequate health care and the general health of the population are leading concerns in our society today. Americans spend billions of dollars each year for health care.

Health care is often delivered through a family doctor. Some areas however, especially rural areas, lack the doctors they need to adequately serve everyone. Physician extenders, such as nurse practitioners and physician's assistants, provide a possible solution to the problem of shortages. In addition to being able to obtain adequate health care when ill, keeping healthy involves good personal health habits, including regular checkups with the dentist and the doctor.

These issues and others were discussed with Indiana County residents in a household survey. Facts about the survey follow, after which needed health services, physician extenders, health care for everyone, and regular health habits are discussed.

THE SURVEY

In July and August 1975, interviewers gathered the information in face-to-face interviews. All adults in Indiana County other than students or persons in an institution had a chance of being included in the survey. A total of 347 adults throughout the county were interviewed: 114 from the northern part of the county, 114 from the central area, and 119 from the southern region (see Figure 1). After the results were compiled, statistical weightings were given to the different regions, which had been sampled at different rates, to make the results representative of the county as a whole.

This illustration shows how to use the reported percentages. Whether or not one has a family doctor is discussed on page 6. For the county as a whole, about 86 percent of the adult population reported that they have a family doctor and 14 percent said they have no family doctor. The 1970 census of population indicates that in April 1970 approximately 45,000 non-student adults 18 and over lived in the county (or about 21,000 males and 24,000 females). Looking again at family doctor, we can determine that approximately 6300 adults (.14 x 45,000) have no family doctor. But 6300 is merely an estimate. To be sure that the estimate is the same as the value we would have obtained had we interviewed the entire population, we would indicate an interval within which we

Figure 1. Health Service Regions for Indiana County

can be quite sure the actual value would be. To do this, statisticians suggest that we add 4 percentage points to the percent, and subtract 4 percentage points from the same percentage. Then multiply these percentages by the total population to see what the outer limits are. In this case, we could say with confidence that between 4500 and 8100 people have no family doctor. These figures can then be used for public decisions regarding needs and policies for Indiana County.

HEALTH SERVICES NEEDED

Availability of doctors was mentioned by over four-fifths (87 percent) of the people as in need of improvement for Indiana County. When asked what medical-related problem most needs improvement, 61 percent of the people chose availability of doctors (Table 1). The seriousness of this problem was also found in an earlier survey taken by telephone in Indiana County during March 1975, in which the most frequently mentioned problem in the county was availability of medical doctors and facilities.

Availability of doctors is especially of concern in the more rural northern and southern regions of the county; choosing availability as "most in need of improvement" were 78 percent in the northern part of the county, 65 percent in the southern region, and 50 percent in the central Indiana County (see Table 2).

Table 1. Percent of Indiana County residents indicating health services need improvement and to what extent

Problem Area	Responses	
	Needs improvement	Most needs improvement
Availability of doctors	87	61
Emergency room services*	71	21
Availability of dentists	51	2
Use of Medicare or public assistance cards	48	5
Home health care (such as visiting nurses)	45	2
Transportation from outlying areas for services	44	4
Hospital Care	40	5

*Includes outpatient services at the hospital and emergency care

Table 2. Percent of Indiana County residents by area of residence indicating availability of doctors is health service most in need of improvement

Region	Percent
Northern	78
Central	50
Southern	65

Indiana County residents were also asked, "Were there times in the past year when you or any member of your family could not get when you needed them the services of a general family doctor?" About a quarter (24 percent) responded yes, with fewer citing this problem in the central part of the county: northern, 26 percent; central, 19 percent; southern, 32 percent.

Family doctors are important providers of health care for Indiana County residents. Approximately 86 percent of the respondents indicated they have a family doctor. Of those who do not have a family doctor (14 percent), most said no doctor was available in the area or that a family doctor was not needed.

Further analysis reveals that those having a family doctor are more likely to visit a doctor for a checkup when they are not ill. Of those with a family doctor, 62 percent had visited a doctor in the previous year when they were not sick, whereas only 36 percent of those without a family doctor had made such a visit.

At the national level, availability of doctors for rural areas is a growing concern. In many rural places, the only doctors now working are approaching retirement age with no prospects of doctors coming in to replace them. While a major shortage of doctors does not appear to exist nationally, a serious problem

in the location of doctors does exist; most doctors graduating from medical schools establish their practices in urban areas.

Efforts are underway in Indiana County to increase the supply of medical workers. In northern Indiana County, a primary care center is being established in Marion Center. Money is being raised for the physical facility and arrangements are underway for the medical personnel. Similarly, in the southern part of the county, a health center is being organized in Burrell Township, and a physician is being sought. In Indiana Borough, a private medical center opened in 1975 with two new pediatricians. Efforts to increase the supply of physicians in Indiana County are continuing.

Respondents were also asked whether local groups or nonlocal groups should initiate action to alleviate this shortage of medical doctors. Analysis of this question by Angelo Taranto at Penn State University showed that of those who chose availability of doctors as the concern which most needs improvement, almost two-thirds (61 percent) said local groups should initiate action.

PHYSICIAN EXTENDERS

To extend the time and capabilities of doctors facing increasing demands on their time, training programs for physician's assistants and nurse practitioners have been developed. Pennsylvania has five

such programs: Hershey Medical Center of The Pennsylvania State University, Hahnemann Medical College in Philadelphia, University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing, St. Christopher's Hospital for Children in Philadelphia, and Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh.

Physician's assistants and nurse practitioners are trained to do routine tasks such as periodic exams, injections, and the removal of stitches. These assistants and practitioners usually work under the supervision of a doctor, either in an office setting or in a clinic. They often have training in spotting unusual symptoms or signs that suggest more serious diseases. When these symptoms are present, the physician's assistant refers the patient to a doctor.

In Indiana County, two nurse practitioners currently are working, one in the southern part of the county and one in Indiana Borough. About 10 percent of the Indiana County residents reported having visited a nurse practitioner or physician's assistant in the previous year. However, a much higher percentage indicated willingness to go to these personnel: 74 percent in Indiana County stated that they would usually or always be willing to accept help from a physician extender working under the direct supervision of a doctor. In the southern region of the county, respondents were even more likely to say always (48 percent) than were those in the northern and central parts (38 percent and 35 percent respectively)

of the county. Only 2 percent of the Indiana County residents said they would never use one of these types of personnel. These findings encourage further recruitment of physician extenders for Indiana County.

ADEQUATE HEALTH CARE FOR EVERYONE

Over four-fifths (84 percent) of the respondents in this survey "agreed very much" that, "Everyone should have adequate health care regardless of ability to pay." However, agreement is less strong on who should pay and administer the funds for these services. Only 56 percent "agreed very much" that, "Federal tax money should be used for providing adequate health care." Another 24 percent "agreed a little." Further, interviewees were asked if "Township or borough officials should get federal money for planning local health care." Only 40 percent "agreed very much," and 26 percent "agreed a little" (Table 3).

REGULAR HEALTH HABITS

Rather than focusing on curing illnesses, keeping healthy now is receiving more emphasis in the United States. Since many chronic diseases can only be treated, not cured, we are becoming increasingly interested in ways to lower the chances of even getting sick.

Keeping healthy involves regular medical visits to detect early symptoms of disease plus practicing good personal living habits.

Table 3. Percent agreeing with statements regarding health care payments

Statement	Responses	
	Agreeing very much	Agreeing a little
Everyone should have adequate health care regardless of ability to pay	84	8
Federal tax money should be used for providing adequate health care	56	24
Township or borough officials should get federal money for planning local health care	40	26

For example, recommended measures for preventing heart disease, the nation's top killer, include: monitoring blood pressure, following a proper diet, exercising regularly, not smoking, and avoiding prolonged stress.

Regular medical visits are important in carrying out many preventive activities. In Indiana County, a regular checkup is part of the lifestyle of slightly over half the adult population. During the 12 months prior to the survey, 58 percent of those inter-

viewed had visited a physician when they were not sick, often for what they termed a regular checkup. During this period, 67 percent reported having had a physical examination, indicating that some people obtained a physical exam when ill. Further, 56 percent in Indiana County say that they regularly--at least once a year--visit the doctor for a checkup or physical. All three of these percentages indicate that over half of the population is visiting a doctor regularly (Table 4).

Table 4. Percent of Indiana County residents visiting a physician for a checkup

Physician visit when not ill within previous year	58
Physical exam within previous year	67
Physician visits scheduled at least once a year for a checkup or physical exam	56

The group of people causing the most concern for health educators and providers are those who say they never go to the doctor for a checkup (38 percent). Further, almost all (83 percent) of the ones who reported that they have never had a physical exam stated that they didn't need one. The benefits of early detection of disease may not be recognized by these individuals.

Or perhaps, these individuals feel that they are unlikely to become ill.

Regular dental visits are another important aspect of staying healthy. Recent reports suggest that the dental health of our nation needs much improvement. Dentists recommend checkups every six months to promote healthy teeth and to decrease the necessity for dentures.

A further question in the survey reveals how often people usually obtain a dental checkup. In Indiana County, 43 percent said they visit a dentist at least every 6 months, and 19 percent stated that they visit only once a year. However, 28 percent said they never visit the dentist for a checkup. Results reveal that people with less education are less likely to schedule regular dental visits.

Pap tests, to detect cervical cancer in women, are now receiving much attention. Early detection of cervical cancer enables doctors to minimize any spread of the cancer. Authorities recommend that all adult women have a yearly Pap test.

Younger women are much more likely to have had a Pap test than older women, although women of middle and older ages have a higher risk of cervical cancer. Among women age 70 and over, 85 percent in Indiana County reported no Pap test was obtained in the past year. These women especially need to be informed of the

benefits of having annual Pap tests.

Women in the central part of Indiana County are more likely (67 percent) than either those in the northern (51 percent) or southern (56 percent) regions of the county to have had a Pap test. Benefits of this exam need to be emphasized to all women, but especially to those living outside the County's central area. In addition, 14 percent of the women reported that they have never had a Pap test. Most of these women are clearly unaware of the value of yearly Pap tests, since many of them said "I didn't need it" when asked their reason for not having one.

Personal health habits, such as eating a balanced diet and getting regular physical activity, are other aspects of keeping healthy. In Indiana County, about two-thirds (67 percent) reported that they regularly do things to stay healthy. Regular exercising was the most often mentioned health activity, followed by regulating the diet and getting enough rest. These responses indicate a willingness to make the necessary effort to stay healthy.

When asked to rate their present health, most respondents rated their health as very good (25 percent) or good (45 percent). Only 8 percent rated their health as not so good or poor. The remaining 22 percent said their health was average.

Healthy living is valued by many Indiana County residents. By combining good health habits with increased availability of doctors, dentists, and physician extenders, many of these people can enjoy increasingly healthy lives.

For more information regarding these results or about Pennsylvania's Title V Rural Development program, contact Mr. Ken Martin, Cooperative Extension Service, Courthouse, Indiana, Pennsylvania 15701.